Literary Pilgrimages in England

I. THE SOUTH

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INTRODUCTION

Visiting places associated with famous authors is a very popular pastime in Britain today, not only with the British, but also with foreign visitors to the country. Film dramatizations of many literary works have given a great incentive to people's desire to see places associated with authors or their books. As a result, a large service industry has grown up to meet this demand, and it is not difficult to obtain information on what to see and how to get there. In this era of easy communication, easy travel, and easy access to film adaptations of favorite works, this should come as no great surprise. What is surprising, perhaps, is that there is nothing new about the popularity of literary pilgrimages and the desire to know as much as possible about the lives and homes of admired authors.

In the past, this kind of activity has sometimes been a cause of distress, either to authors and/or their families, or to places with which they have been connected. During the century following the death in 1616 of William Shakespeare at his home, New Place, in Stratford-upon-Avon, there was a growing interest nationwide in his plays. Admiring his work, an increasing number of people visited Stratford to find out about the man. By the mid-eighteenth century, visitors to New Place had become so numerous that in 1759 the then owner of the property demolished the house in anger and irritation. (The subsequent outcry forced him to flee the town).

After Jane Austen's death in 1817, her sister Cassandra, disliking the thought of prying posterity, destroyed certain of Jane's letters that she felt were too revealing. Mrs Gaskell, novelist and biographer, considered enquiries into her personal life as an "impertinent custom" and as "so objectionable and indelicate a practice" that she refused any such requests, as did her family following her death in 1865. Consequently, her daughter, Meta Gaskell, left instructions with her solicitors when she died in 1913...
to the effect that all documents concerning her mother should be burnt. After she became famous, Charlotte Brontë worried about the effects of people visiting Haworth and its environs to see for themselves what they had read about in her books, and expressed the hope that they would, for the most part, be put off by its general inaccessibility.

Today, however, through economic necessity, such activity is, for the most part, welcomed. During the 1970s, industrial production in Britain fell, and unemployment figures rose. People sought alternative occupations, offering greater security. Self-employment began to look more attractive. The development of the service industry was a natural consequence of all this, coupled as it was with an expanding tourist trade. When increasing numbers of people visit any place, they also require hotels or inns to stay at, restaurants or pubs to eat at, transport to take them there, information centers to tell them the background story, and shops to supply them with souvenirs. Thus, almost any place that can boast of some literary connection has taken advantage of it, to the benefit of those for whom employment has been created, if not for the peace and quiet of the place in question.

While we all of us decry personal intrusion, it remains an indisputable fact that we all have an insatiable curiosity about our fellow humans — particularly if they are famous! When this leads to the preservation of our literary heritage, it does not seem quite so bad.

In this article, we are going to look at a few authors whose works have been as popular abroad as at home. Most people coming to Britain start their visit in London, so it seems a good idea to begin with two authors very closely associated with that city and its environs, namely, Geoffrey Chaucer and Charles Dickens.

**GEOFFREY CHAUCER (1342?-1400)**

In writing of pilgrimages, it seems fitting to begin with Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* pilgrims, who, after the original meaning of the word, made their journey for a religious purpose, not a secular one. They set off from the Tabard Inn at SOUTHWARK in London. The original inn was demolished in 1629, but it was situated in Talbot Yard, an alley a little to the south of the George Inn (built 1677 and still standing) in Southwark’s Borough High Street, which was the main medieval route from London to the town of Canterbury in the county of Kent.
CANTERBURY has been a place of pilgrimage since 1170, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas à Becket, was murdered in the cathedral. Such a sacrilegious action shocked the nation, and people travelled long distances to worship or pray for miracles at Becket's shrine. Today, they still come, for Canterbury is the home of Christianity in England, dating back to the year AD 597, when Saint Augustine founded an abbey and began the building of a church. Visit the cathedral, not only to see the site of Becket’s martyrdom and the worn stone steps that led to his shrine, but also to view its magnificent architecture and sense its living history, almost overwhelming in a building that has seen so much.

To find out what it was like to be a pilgrim in the time of Chaucer, visit the Canterbury Tales exhibit in St Margaret’s Street, which recreates that medieval world, complete with sounds, sights, and smells.

The history of Canterbury, from Roman times to the twentieth century, can be seen at the Canterbury Heritage exhibition in the Poor Priests’ Hospital, situated between the Stour River and Stour Street.

A Londoner by birth, a courtier to the King by profession, and a poet by inclination, Chaucer's association with Canterbury lies in his authorship of *The Canterbury Tales*, that lively collection of stories, comic, tragic, or heroic, told by a band of pilgrims as they slowly travelled from London to Canterbury. Almost all that is known of Chaucer's life comes from official records, particularly account-books, which list his various appointments in public service together with the salaries paid to him. These show that he did a considerable amount of travelling, both in England, and on the Continent. One of his appointments led to his living in Kent for a while, and no doubt he came to know Canterbury well. Today, over 600 years later, those parts of the town which have retained their medieval-era buildings must look pretty much the same as in his day.

**How to get there:**

CANTERBURY: Trains take 80 minutes from London’s Victoria Station and arrive at Canterbury East Station. From London’s Charing Cross Station they arrive at Canterbury West Station. National Express coaches take about 2 hours from London’s Victoria Coach Station. Motorists should try the A2 London to Dover road if they wish to follow the route of the medieval pilgrims.

SOUTHWARK: Take London Underground’s Northern Line (southbound) for London Bridge Station.
CHARLES DICKENS (1812–1870)

Charles Dickens was not born in London, but went to live there with his family in 1822, when he was ten years old. The house in PORTSMOUTH where he was born in 1812 and lived for the first two years of his life, is now a museum containing various mementoes of his life. It is located at 393 Commercial Road, and is open to the public.

In 1817, the Dickens family moved to Chatham in Kent where they lived for five years. These were possibly the happiest five years of Charles’s life, a carefree time which, when he was not in school, was spent in exploring the entire area, often accompanied by his father. John Dickens worked as a Navy Pay Clerk at the Chatham Dockyard and the young Charles absorbed all the atmosphere of the shipbuilding trade. Chatham, at this time, had already merged with the ancient cathedral city of ROCHESTER. This city, and its old buildings, is, apart from London, featured in Dickens’s novels more than any other place. For example, the 400-year-old Royal Victoria and Bull Hotel in the High Street figured in both Pickwick Papers (as “The Bull Hotel”) and Great Expectations (as “the Blue Boar”). It is still a restaurant and hotel today. Also in the High Street is the sixteenth century Eastgate House, the Nun’s House of Dickens’s last (unfinished) novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood. Eastgate House is now the DICKENS CENTRE, where a series of tableaux bring some of the author’s famous characters and their Victorian world to life. The Tudor era Restoration House (built in 1587) on Maidstone Road is said to be the model for “Satis House” of Great Expectations.

Many shops and restaurants in Rochester have taken advantage of the Dickens connection in their names. Among them you can find The Oliver Twist, Fagin’s Alley, Ye Olde Curiositie Shoppe, and Mr Pickwick’s Restaurant (serving foods such as Micawbers Mackerel, Peggotty’s Paté, Fagins Florida, Pipkin Prawns, or Oliver Twist’s Gruel). Each July, the city prepares for its annual four-day festival and tribute to Charles Dickens, holding costume parades and enacting scenes from his novels.

In the town of COBHAM can be found the half-timbered Tudor inn THE OLD LEATHER BOTTLE, still serving food and drink, which featured in Pickwick Papers. Today, the members of the Pickwick Club, devoted admirers of Dickens’s works, meet there regularly, dressed in appropriate costume, to wine and dine.

During one of his rambles with his father in this area, Dickens saw a house
called GAD'S HILL PLACE, for which he expressed so much admiration that his father told him he might one day be able to live there if he worked extremely hard. Some thirty-five years later, when he was rich and famous, Dickens did indeed purchase this house and lived in it for the last twelve years of his life. The house is not open to public viewing. However, the Swiss chalet summer house in which Dickens did much of his writing has been moved from Gad's Hill Place and can be seen in the grounds of Eastgate House in Rochester.

Another town in Kent closely associated with Dickens is the seaside resort of BROADSTAIRS, in the north-east of the country, where the author used to holiday with his family. The house now called BLEAK HOUSE, located on a hill overlooking the harbor, was where he often stayed. Most of David Copperfield was written in this house, and it is now open all year round to visitors. The DICKENS HOUSE MUSEUM on the opposite side of the harbor, open during the afternoons from April to October, also contains Dickens memorabilia. Each year for a week in June, Broadstairs holds a DICKENS FESTIVAL, with music, presentations of his work and costume parades.

In 1822, John Dickens moved his family to LONDON. This move heralded the start of Charles Dickens's experiences of the rougher side of life, which he later put to vivid use in his books. The family had no money and lived in squalor. The young Charles, ten years old, had to go to work sealing and labelling pots of blacking, under appalling working conditions. By 1824, his father was in a debtor's prison and Charles used to visit him there after work. The misery and degradation of this period of his life remained an unforgettable experience, especially so when contrasted with the charm of his Kentish days. However, after his father was released from prison, Charles was sent to school again, and later found employment as a solicitor's clerk. By the mid-1830s, he was working as a newspaper reporter. In 1836, his first major collection of stories and articles, Sketches by Boz, was published. In 1837, Dickens, with his wife and son, moved to 48 Doughty Street, London, where he lived for two years. As the family grew in size (Dickens had ten children altogether), they moved several more times to larger houses mainly in London. Then, in 1856, Dickens purchased the Gad's Hill property, where he died in 1870.

In 1923, the house in Doughty Street was bought by the Dickens Fellowship, a society for admirers of the work of Charles Dickens, and two years later opened as the DICKENS HOUSE MUSEUM. Many items of furniture used by Charles Dickens and artifacts connected with him can be seen here. Copies of his books, and a selection of
original drawings done for his novels are also on display.

How to get there:


2. **ROCHESTER, KENT:** situated on the A2 road; the M2 motorway runs south of the town; about one hour by train from London's Victoria Station. Coaches run once a day between Canterbury and Rochester-Chatham.

3. **COBHAM, KENT:** not far from Rochester on the A2 London-Dover road.

4. **BROADSTAIRS, KENT:** one of three seaside resorts (with Margate and Ramsgate) in Kent's north-east corner. Take a National Express coach from Canterbury.

5. **PORTSMOUTH, HAMPSHIRE:** About two hours by train from London's Waterloo Station.

**JANE AUSTEN (1775-1817)**

Besides Charles Dickens, the county of Hampshire is also associated with another much-loved English novelist, Jane Austen. She was born at the rectory in the village of Steventon, where her father was the vicar, and lived there until her father's retirement in 1801. Unfortunately, all that remains of Steventon Rectory today is its water pump, standing forlorn in a field. However, a drawing of the house shows that it was sufficiently commodious to accommodate Mr and Mrs Austen's large family. Lively, sociable, and intelligent, the Austen clan were a major influence on Jane's humorously satirical writings.

The family of parents and daughters (the sons by this time were making their own way in the world) moved to the city of **BATH** in the county of Avon in May, 1801. They settled at No. 4 Sydney Place, but moved to 27 Green Park Buildings in October, 1804. Mr Austen died in January, 1805. Mrs Austen and her daughters then moved to 25 Gay Street, where they stayed until the summer of 1806, when they left Bath for good. These houses were rented, not bought, by the Austen family, hence the short time they stayed at each of them. The Sydney Place house is divided into apartments today, but a plaque outside the house commemorates the fact that Jane Austen once lived there. The importance of Bath to those wishing to follow in Jane Austen's
footsteps is not, therefore, the places in which she lived, but the use she made of the
city in her novels. Even with all the changes which it has undergone, the beautiful city
of Bath is still recognisably the same place that Jane Austen knew so well. To her
fans, it is a thrill to walk along the streets she described, to drink the waters in the
Pump Room, or to sit in the peace and quiet of Bath Abbey, as she must have done.

Bath is the major setting of two of her novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, and
is mentioned many times in her other books. Famous for its hot springs, the city was
extremely popular throughout the 18th century as a health and pleasure resort.

Visitors came to drink and bathe in the waters, accommodation was good, shopping
was excellent, and there was plenty of entertainment in the form of concerts, theater,
balls, and card parties. Bath would have been as familiar to Jane Austen's early
readers as it was to Jane herself.

In a visit to Bath, don't miss the Pump Room, the Abbey, the Assembly Rooms
(where the Museum of Costume is located), the Royal Crescent, The Circus, and
Pulteney Bridge. The fascinating Roman Baths and Museum should also not be left
out. These baths were unknown to Jane Austen, however, since excavation work (they
are six meters below street level) did not begin in earnest until 1867, and was not
completed until 1983.

In 1806, the Austens left Bath for good. They went first to Southampton, but
moved in 1809 to a house belonging to Jane's brother Edward. **Chawton Cottage**
was on Edward's Hampshire property and not far from Steventon, where James
Austen had succeeded his father as rector. Chawton was Jane Austen's last home. It
is now a museum containing many of her belongings. The village is deep in the
countryside and is best reached by car.

Towards the end of Jane Austen's life, when she became very ill, her sister,
Cassandra, took her to Winchester for medical care. There she died, in a house
on College Street (not open to the public), and was buried in Winchester Cathedral.
Her grave in the north aisle of the nave is marked by an inscribed stone, and
overlooked by a brass tablet and a memorial window.

**How to get there:**

1. **Bath, Avon**: by train from London's Paddington Station. The journey
takes just over an hour.

2. **Chawton Cottage, Hampshire**: as mentioned above, best reached
by car. From London, take the M3 to Guildford, then the A31 as far as
Alton. Chawton is a well-signposted mile beyond Alton. Alternatively, check out coach tours to the area from London or Winchester.

3. WINCHESTER: just over an hour by train from London's Waterloo Station.

THOMAS HARDY (1840-1928)

Continuing south-west through Southampton from Winchester, one reaches Dorset's county town, DORCHESTER. Thomas Hardy was born in Higher Bockhampton, a village three miles northeast of Dorchester. Apart from a few years living in London, Hardy spent his whole life in Dorset, which he used as the setting for his novels under the name Wessex. He described the towns and villages in his novels with such accuracy that the real places were easily recognizable. An alternative route to the Dorchester area would be to continue west from Salisbury through the ancient town of Shaftesbury, well described in Hardy's Jude the Obscure (1895) under its old name of Shaston. The town is situated on the edge of a plateau with a magnificent view over Blackmoor Vale. From there, all the way down to the coastal town of Weymouth, are places whose names are as well known to Hardy's admirers in their Wessex version as they are in their Dorset one: Dorchester as Casterbridge, Weymouth as Budmouth, Sturminster Newton as Stourcastle, and Bere Regis as Kingsbere, to name but a few. The church in Bere Regis is a place of particular pilgrimage for fans of the novel Tess of the d'Urbervilles, for not only was that where she was buried, but there is also a window with the crest of the Turbervilles, who were an old Dorset family on whom the novel was based.

HARDY'S COTTAGE in HIGHER BOCKHAMPTON is now owned by the National Trust. It may not always be open to viewing, but just from the outside it is charming, with its thatched roof, quiet and secluded location, garden full of flowering plants, and honeysuckle and roses climbing the walls near the cottage door. It was built in 1800 by Hardy's great-grandfather. Hardy was born there in 1840, and did not finally leave it until he was thirty-four, when he got married. His mother lived there until her death in 1904, and his brother and sisters stayed on in the cottage until 1912. Two of Hardy's novels were written there, and the author continued to visit this much-loved place until the end of his long life, even though there was no longer any family connection.
Hardy trained as an architect and later built a home for himself in Dorchester called Max Gate. It is now owned by the National Trust, but is not open to the public. However, a reconstruction of Hardy's study at Max Gate can be seen in the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester, along with a collection of his manuscripts and some of his personal belongings.

How to get there:

HIGHER BOCKHAMPTON and DORCHESTER: If travelling by road, the A31 from Southampton runs into Dorchester, passing the turn-off to Higher Bockhampton three miles outside Dorchester.

British Rail's Western Region and Southern Region services have through connections for Dorchester.

For those wishing to see and absorb as much as possible of Hardy locales in his county of "Wessex", hiring a car in one of the larger towns in the area is the best way to do so.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

In this circuitous journey from London and through southern England, we now turn in a northerly direction to the Midlands county of Warwickshire and the town of STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, birthplace of William Shakespeare. With over half a million visitors a year, this small country town plays host to more people than any other place outside London. It is a very easy place to visit, since its central location puts it within reach of most of the larger towns in the south, and many are the coach tours which include Stratford in their itinerary. Some of these, the London ones especially, are evening tours designed to take in the performance of a Shakespeare play.

As a place where the River Avon could be crossed, Stratford's history goes back to pre-Roman times. Given the right to become a market town in the twelfth century, Stratford became increasingly prosperous, and in the following century, the fine Holy Trinity church was built. By Shakespeare's day, Stratford had become a center of thriving business activity, thus attracting the poet's father, John Shakespeare, a glove-maker by trade, to take up residence in the town. A respected tradesman, by 1568 he held office as Stratford's Bailiff (or mayor).

Not a great deal is known about Shakespeare's life. His early schooling was in
Stratford, but in 1582, still only eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway. Following the birth of three children, Susanna in 1583 and twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585, he left Stratford for London. His working career as both player and playwright was mainly in London. That he was sufficiently successful is shown by his purchase of New Place, a fine house in Stratford, in 1597, to which he returned to live during the last few years of his life.

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust looks after the five Shakespearian Properties, and also offers special inclusive admission tickets for those planning to visit either the three in town, or all five.

The three properties in the town include Shakespeare's Birthplace in Henley Street, entered through the Shakespeare Centre next door, New Place/Nash's House in Chapel Street, and Hall's Croft in Old Town. As mentioned in the introduction, New Place was destroyed long ago. It had been built by Hugh Clopton, a Stratford merchant who rose to become Lord Mayor of London in 1492. He was also responsible for the building of the main bridge over the Avon into Stratford, the 14-arched stone Clopton Bridge, which went up between 1480 and 1490. An attractive Elizabethan Knott garden with herbs and flowers set in an intricate pattern beautifies the grounds of New Place, of which only the foundations remain. Next door is Nash's House, the home of Shakespeare's granddaughter, Elizabeth, who married Thomas Nash. Hall's Croft, another magnificent Tudor building, belonged to Shakespeare's daughter Susanna and her husband, John Hall.

The two out-of-town properties are Anne Hathaway's Cottage at Shottery, and Mary Arden's House at Wilmcote. Anne Hathaway's Cottage is situated about two kilometers from the town. There are two footpaths, one off Albany Road, and one off Grove Road, leading to the Cottage; on foot, the journey takes about thirty minutes. There is also a bus service, leaving from Bridge Street. By car, take the A422 Alcester Road or the A439 Evesham Road. The charming thatched cottage with its colorful English country garden belonged to Anne's father, and in fact remained in the possession of the Hathaway family until 1892. Wilmcote is over five kilometers from Stratford. It can be reached by railway (the house is a five-minute walk from Wilmcote Station), or by car taking the Alcester Road or the A34 Birmingham Road. The Wilmcote property, a farmstead with many outbuildings, was the home of Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden. When her father died in 1556, he left the entire property to her. It continued to be used as a family farmstead, with insignificant
Another way of visiting all the properties is to take one of the regular guided open-top bus tours run by the Guide Friday Tourism Centre located at 14 Rother Street, Stratford. These tours are operated once, twice, or four times an hour, depending on the season.

Other places to visit in Stratford include Holy Trinity Church, where Shakespeare was both baptized and buried, and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre on the banks of the River Avon. There are also several other interesting old buildings in Stratford. Harvard House on the High Street dates back to 1596. The builder's grandson, John Harvard, was the founder of Harvard University in the United States. The house is now owned by Harvard University. The Information Centre can be located in Judith Quiney's House on the corner of Bridge Street and High Street. Judith, Shakespeare's younger daughter, lived there after her marriage to Thomas Quiney. The Falcon Hotel on Chapel Lane is fifteenth century, as is the White Swan Hotel in Rother Street. Opposite the Falcon stands the thirteenth century Guild Chapel, with the ancient Guildhall and fifteenth century almshouses next to it.

Despite its fame, and its manifold attractions for visitors, Stratford remains at heart a small country market town. Teeming though it may be with people by day, try it in the early morning, or the early evening, or in the out-of-season autumn or winter, and its hidden charms will come as a surprise, the real Stratford upon that lovely river, the Avon.

We end as we began, in SOUTHWARK, on the south side of the River Thames, this time in the London of Shakespeare, not Chaucer. Bankside, a district on the South Bank of the Thames between Blackfriars Bridge and London Bridge, was well known for its theatres and amusement gardens during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the 1590s, Shakespeare, as actor and dramatic poet, joined the group of strolling players called the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Around 1599, this group began building the Globe Theatre in Bankside as their base. The site is marked by a plaque on the wall of a brewery in Park Street. Today, on a site between Park Street and Bankside, a new Globe Theatre is being built, in Elizabethan style, with an open roof and no artificial lighting. Although not yet completely finished, it will soon be staging its first performance of a Shakespearian play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in time for the 429th anniversary, in April 1993, of the poet's birth.
The theater tradition continues in Southwark, for here also can be found the Old Vic Theatre, near Waterloo Station, and the National Theatre, on the riverside near Waterloo Bridge. On Saturday afternoons from June to August, the Southwark Shakespeare Festival is held in the courtyard of the Bear Gardens Museum in Bankside.

How to get there:

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON: the following roads pass through Stratford: the A34 Birmingham-Oxford road, the A46 Cheltenham-Warwick road, and the A422 Banbury-Worcester road. There are many car parks in the town, but at the height of the season it can still be difficult to find a parking space.

By rail: from London, the best route is to take Guide Friday's fast rail/road link, by train to Coventry from London's Euston Station, then by bus to Stratford, the entire journey taking less than two hours. An alternative route is the almost 3-hour journey from Euston, changing at Leamington Spa.

By coach: from Oxford in 40 minutes. From other towns, check with Tourist Information Offices or coach companies.

SOUTHWARK: See section on Chaucer.
POSTSCRIPT

In this brief journey from London, through some of England's southern counties, Kent, Hampshire, Dorset, and the South Midlands county of Warwickshire, following in the footsteps of Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, and William Shakespeare, much has, of necessity, been left out, since the intention was to produce a practical, rather than a poetic, guide. Keeping, for the moment, to the practical, it cannot be stressed too strongly that any visitor to Britain should stay in touch with the Tourist Information Offices which can be found in any town. Each of them can supply a wealth of information on their own area, and useful leaflets are freely available. They can provide the best advice on how to travel or where to stay, even making bookings, if needed. Their job is to ease the path of the visitor. In the height of the summer season, when it sometimes seems that the whole country is on the move, they can be a vital lifeline to a stranger.

It is hard to end, however, without straying into the poetic. Britain is such a small country, with such a long history, that very little of it does not give the feeling of walking through the centuries. From prehistoric barrows, cairns, or standing stones to Roman ruins, from villages which still retain their medieval structure to walled cities, from small country churches to magnificent cathedrals, from Tudor thatched cottages to Georgian stately homes, each age has left its distinct mark for following ages to cherish and preserve. Encompassing these is the splendor of the countryside, rolling green hills and tree-shaded rivers, horses and sheep and cattle grazing peacefully in patchwork fields, beauty as far as the eye can see. Slip away from the beaten track, if you can, and enjoy these things, too, as you travel on your literary pilgrimage around England.

Literature Cited

Background Reading


Guide Books


